

Chapter

5

The Moderns (1914–1939)



Welcome to Our City (1921) by Charles Henry Demuth.
Oil on canvas (25 $\frac{1}{8}$ " \times 20 $\frac{1}{8}$ ").

Terra Foundation for the Arts, Daniel J. Terra Collection.

Reading Standard 3.5c
Analyze recognized works of American literature representing a variety of genres and traditions.

The following essay provides highlights of the historical period. For a more detailed version of this essay, see *Holt Literature and Language Arts*, pages 562–569.

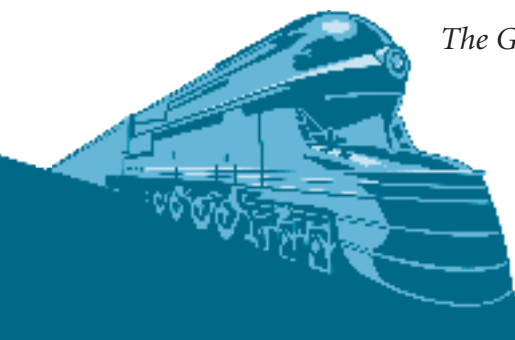
IDENTIFY

ANALYZE

10 The American Dream: Pursuit of a Promise

■ America as a New Eden

are reflected in one of the greatest American novels,
The Great Gatsby (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald.



EVALUATE

Re-read lines 10–34.
Underline the three elements
of the **American dream**. Do
you think these elements are
still part of the American
dream today?



■ A Belief in Progress

The second element is optimism, justified by the ever-expanding opportunity many people had come to expect. Americans had come to believe in progress—that life will keep getting better and that wealth, justice, and joy are just around the corner.

■ Triumph of the Individual

The final element in the American dream is the importance and ultimate triumph of the individual—the independent, self-reliant person. This ideal was championed by Ralph Waldo Emerson (page 76), who probably deserves most of the credit for defining the essence of the American dream, including its roots in the promise of the “new Eden” and its faith that “things are getting better all the time.”

A Crack in the World: Breakdown of Beliefs and Traditions

In the postwar period, long-held beliefs and traditions began to be tested. Postwar writers became skeptical of the New England Puritan tradition and the gentility that had been central to the literary ideal. In fact, the center of American literary life now finally started to shift away from New England, which had been the native region of America’s most brilliant writers during the



Village Speakeasy, Closed for Violation (c. 1934) by Ben Shahn. Tempera on masonite (16³/₈" × 47⁷/₈").

Museum of the City of New York. Permanent Deposit of the Public Art Project through the Whitney Museum. © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

nineteenth century. Many modernist writers, in fact, were born in the South, the Midwest, or the West.

In the postwar period, two new intellectual theories or movements combined to influence previous beliefs and values: **Marxism** and **psychoanalysis**.

Marxism and the Challenge to Free Enterprise

- 50 In Russia during World War I, a Marxist revolution had toppled and even murdered an anointed ruler, the czar. The socialistic beliefs of Karl Marx (1818–1883) that had powered the Russian Revolution in 1917 conflicted with the American system of capitalism and free enterprise, and Marxists threatened to export their revolution everywhere. Some Americans, however, believed that certain elements of Marxism would provide much-needed rights to workers. After visiting Russia, the American writer Lincoln Steffens reported, “I have seen the future and it works.”

Freud and the Unconscious Mind

- 60 In Vienna, there was another ground-shaking movement. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, had

Notes

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 45–47. Locate and circle the names of two new theories or movements that sprang up following the Great War.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 50–58. What did Americans regard as one positive element of Marxism?

IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

What effect did the interest in psychology have on narrative techniques (lines 71–77)?

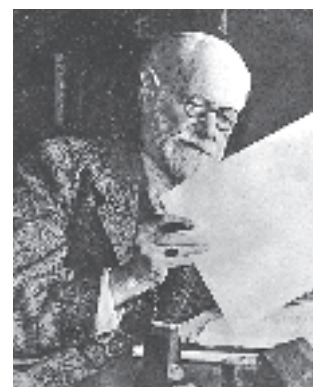
INTERPRET

Pause at line 85. Do you think Prohibition accomplished what its supporters had hoped? Explain.

IDENTIFY

In lines 86–95, circle the important right women finally won. Underline where some writers chose to live.

opened the workings of the unconscious mind to examination. He also called for a new understanding of human sexuality and the role it plays in our unconscious thoughts. Throughout America, there was a growing interest in this new field of psychology and a resulting concern about the amount of freedom an individual had if our actions were indeed influenced by an uncontrollable subconscious.



Sigmund Freud.

One literary result of this interest in the psyche was the narrative technique called **stream of consciousness**. This writing style abandoned chronology and attempted to imitate the moment-by-moment flow of a character's perceptions and memories. American writers William Faulkner (page 217) and Katherine Anne Porter (page 233) used the stream-of-consciousness technique in their works.

At Home and Abroad: The Jazz Age

In 1919, the U.S. Constitution was amended to prohibit the manufacture and sale of alcohol, which was considered a social evil. Far from inspiring traditional values, however, Prohibition ushered in an age characterized by the bootlegger, the speak-easy, the short-skirted flapper, the new rhythms of jazz, and the gangster. The writer F. Scott Fitzgerald gave this era its name: the Jazz Age.

During the Jazz Age, women too played a prominent role. In 1920, women won the right to vote, and they began to create a presence in artistic, intellectual, and social circles. As energetic as this era was in America, many American artists and writers—F. Scott Fitzgerald among them—abandoned their own shores for life in France. The wave of Americans living abroad was another signal that something had gone wrong with the American dream—with the idea that America was Eden, with our belief in progress, and especially with the conviction that America was a land of heroes.



Grace Under Pressure: The New American Hero

100 The most influential of all the post–World War I writers was Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway is probably most famous for his literary style, which influenced generations of writers. Like the Puritans who strove for a plain style centuries earlier, Hemingway reduced the fanciness of literary language to the bare bones of the truth it must express.

Hemingway also introduced a new kind of hero to American fiction. The Hemingway hero is a man of action, a warrior, and a tough competitor; he has a code of honor, courage, and endurance. He shows, in Hemingway’s own words, “grace under pressure.” But above all else, the Hemingway hero is thoroughly disillusioned with the emptiness he finds at the
110 mysterious center of creation. Hemingway found his own answer to this crisis of faith with a belief in decency, bravery, and skillfulness, in spite of what he saw as the absolutely unbeatable odds waged against us all. A further part of this code is the importance of recognizing and snatching up the rare, good moments that life has to offer.

Modern Voices in Poetry: A Dazzling Period of Experimentation

120 By the 1920s, the last traces of British influence on American poetry were washed away, and American poets entered into their most dazzling period of experimentation. Artists and poets sought new ways of seeing and thinking. Many poets began to explore the artistic life of Europe, especially Paris, and they sought to create poems that invited new ways of seeing and thinking. Ezra Pound (page 205) and T. S. Eliot (page 209) used the suggestive techniques of **symbolism** to fashion a new, modernist poetry. Pound also was at the head of a related poetic movement called **imagism**. The imagist and symbolist styles would prevail in poetry until the mid-twentieth century.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 104–115. Name three characteristics of the Hemingway hero.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 126. Circle the names of the poets who experimented with the style called **symbolism**.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Pause at line 139. How was Robert Frost's poetry different from Eliot's and Pound's poetry?

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 142–151. How did African American poetry during the Harlem Renaissance influence American culture?

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 152–157. What still seems "modern" about Modernism?

Voices of American Character

130 Meanwhile other American poets rejected modernist trends. These poets stayed at home and said what they had to say in plain American speech. Their individual accents reveal the regional diversity of American life and character. Of these poets the greatest was Robert Frost (page 249). Frost's poems were written in ordinary New England speech. He had a gift for taking the most conventional poetic forms and giving them a twist all his own. Frost's ability to bring his own personality to verse resulted in a poetic voice that was unique and impossible to imitate.

140 The Harlem Renaissance: Voices of the African American Experience

In the early 1920s, a group of black poets focused directly on the unique contributions of African American culture to America. Their poetry based its rhythms on spirituals and jazz, its lyrics on songs known as the blues, and its diction on the street talk of the ghettos. African American lyric poets, especially Langston Hughes (page 259), brought literary distinction to the broad movement of artists known as the **Harlem Renaissance**. When African American poetry, along with music, became part of the Jazz Age, it helped usher in a new appreciation of the role of black talent in American culture.

The American Dream Revisited

The writers of the modernist era—some of the best that America has produced—experimented boldly with forms and subject matter. But they were still trying to find the answers to basic human questions: Who are we? Where are we going? What values should guide us on the search for our human identity?